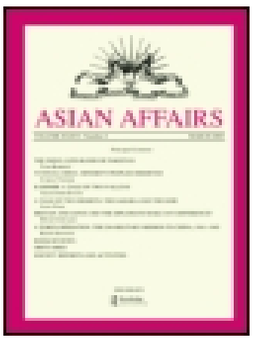

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SMALL STATE SECURITY ENGAGEMENT IN POST-ARAB SPRING MENA: THE CASE OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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Introduction

The Arab Spring critically altered the nature and perceptions of potential threats across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The rise to political prominence of non-state actors fundamentally challenged traditional and predominantly authoritarian forms of governance that had previously dominated the region. Some MENA states were as a result thrust into civil wars and violent transitions of power, while others were only marginally affected. This trend is especially evident within Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, which witnessed significant unrest. Others, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), remained largely unaffected. Doha saw the Arab Spring as a prime opportunity to increase its influence and construct new narratives about itself in the region. However, other GCC states only saw threats in the situation. As a result, there have been contrasting foreign policy strategies among these various states ever since.

It has been necessary for the smaller littoral GCC states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE to practise what Nye describes as 'smart diplomacy'. These states are using both hard and soft power to circumvent potential threats.[1] The need to practise such a strategy is occasioned by these states' small populations and land masses, fragile social dynamics, illiberal governance structures, as well as the unstable nature of the

region and inter-regional rivalry. The region is however supported by vast natural resources that have allowed the economic and societal development of these states whilst also financing foreign relations strategies that have helped cultivate advantageous foreign ties. Since the First Gulf War, the GCC states have been firmly aligned with the US and European states. However, the smaller GCC states have gradually diversified security cooperation and assistance relationships, a process which was somewhat accelerated under the Obama presidency.

The diversification of foreign relations is a critical aspect of the foreign policy dynamics of small states, with Ulrichsen observing that "for small states seeking to best leverage their limited political, economic and strategic assets, it made rational sense to increase their importance to as many powerful external partners as possible".[2] Small states are therefore required to balance an array of strategies that can augment present and future relationships. This approach has prompted an exploration of broader foreign ties away from the GCC states' traditional allies in the West to include China, India, and Russia. By balancing foreign relations, the GCC states can avoid a dependence on specific relationships and thus further enhance their independence.

While foreign policy strategies can be analysed through their application, it is difficult to examine critically the policies of GCC states on account of their architecture of power and condensed decision-making structure. The mechanisms of foreign policy that are exercised by bureaucrats, committees and resolutions are subtle, guarded, and limited to counsel and suggestion. For this reason, it is critical that an assessment of the foreign relations of GCC states engages both with states and individual actors.

However, this is complicated as the GCC states have, through the post-Arab Spring period, increasingly deployed foreign relations strategies indirectly through proxies. This has helped to augment their limited resources and conceal attribution for sensitive portfolios. Examples can include the recruitment of private military companies (PMCs), private investments by ruling family members, or the employment of trusted and well-connected individuals who can select foreign policy strategies and assist their amplification. A consideration of individual actors also focuses attention on the cultural norms and customs within which they work, that also legitimise the same traditional and cultural values that support the position of the region's monarchs.

The socio-cultural grounding of diplomatic practices among the GCC states forms an important aspect of their foreign relations. Originating

from the GCC states' tribal nature and regulated power structures, the way in which international relations is practically implemented mirrors many of the region's societal characteristics: a combination of formal etiquette-led engagement with a growing plethora of informal mediums and channels that enhance political engagement. As a result, channels of formal and indirect engagement can be evidence of evidence equally significant manifestations of foreign policy. This article looks at how such engagements impact on foreign policy, with particular regard to the security sector.

GCC post-Arab spring security-focused foreign policy

The clearest area of heightened foreign policy engagement by the GCC states has been within the security domain. This has been a direct result of the Arab Spring, generational leadership changes, and evolving foreign relations with traditional allies. The security-focused foreign policies of the GCC states have primarily developed on two fronts: through their armed forces and personnel connections or proxies.

The GCC's security forces hold a prominent position as a result of the image the institutions project within their societies. While historically the GCC Armed Forces were only used domestically or for peacekeeping operations, since 2011 there has been a significant increase in combat operations by the GCC states. Qatar led regional efforts to remove President Ghaddafi and President Assad from power in Libya and Syria respectively, while Saudi Arabia has directed a war in Yemen to remove the Houthis from Sana'a. The UAE also has significantly increased its overseas operations, engaging adversaries from Mali to Somalia, and often in conjunction with strategic foreign partners.

While in the economic and commercial spheres informal foreign relations can commonly be seen through the involvement of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and family-owned holding companies, similar practices within the realm of security are often conducted through personnel linkages. This field has witnessed blossoming relationships occurring between the region's politically relevant elites (PREs), non-state actors, and commercial agents and their foreign counterparts. Engagements have occurred between states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-state actors, private companies, and community groups. Particularly common are operations through ruling family members and their

commercial entities that manage and direct private-partnerships within the security field.

On account of the heightened sensitivity of security policies within the GCC, the political-military system demands a tight control of policy and strategy. This being the case, the fostering of interpersonal relationships ends up contributing to and impacting on sensitive portfolios, augmenting capability and policy implementation, thanks largely to the aura of ambiguity and privacy which surrounds the relationships. Likewise, to ensure political acquiesce, elite figures personally manage strategic relationships with foreign personnel. The most prominent example of this was the former Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz al Saud, and his direct management of the Kingdom's strategy in Yemen. However, this article will focus on the case study of the UAE to examine how strategic interactions have developed.

Beyond the GCC states' collective alliances with the US and EU states, the post-Arab Spring era has seen diverging foreign policy strategies among the GCC states. Regardless of their ideological motivations, the three most proactive GCC states, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all have experienced leadership changes since the start of the Arab Spring. There have also been significant leadership changes within the US, UK, and France during this period. This may offer an explanation why, through an actor-level foreign policy analysis, the GCC's relationship between those said countries has been turbulent since 2011.

The instability of the traditionally strong foreign relations of the GCC states with Western nations has been accompanied by the development of a proliferation of pragmatic ties with an increasing array of states and non-state actors. While no state can currently offer a substitute for the US's guarantee of security within the Persian Gulf, many new relationships have appeared which are strategically enhancing the GCC's capabilities in place of the traditional Western assistance.

The increasing number of combat engagements of the GCC states after the Arab Spring has signalled a new era of MENA foreign relations. With small militaries, the GCC's small states have more commonly engaged in proxy security engagement across MENA. However, the UAE bucks this trend by directly engaging in overseas security operations. As the region's most proactive state in security engagements, the UAE presents a unique example to illustrate how the security

engagement of GCC states has evolved within MENA since the Arab Spring.

The United Arab Emirates

The UAE has been shown to understand, value, and prioritise social subsystems when engaging in foreign relations. This article argues that the UAE interprets and uses a strategy that acknowledges and exploits multiple sources of authority and legitimacy, formally and informally within MENA societies in order to amplify its engagement. The in general UAE views "society as a mélange of social organisations rather than a dichotomous structure,"[3] and therefore it appreciates the multitude of ideological, sectarian, corporate, tribal or kinship groups that divide MENA society.

The UAE's adoption of such a 'state-in-society' approach to foreign relations should be understood in terms of two fundamental factors: firstly, the UAE itself is a federal state whose powers and societal groups are fragmented, and secondly, on account of the source of power in the national ultimately being concentrated within a single tribe, there is a general appreciation within the country for informal linkages to support policy engagement.

Due to the delegation of legal powers within the UAE, there are competing approaches to foreign policy, and varying actions made by different centres of power within the state. This was most publicly observed in the first Gulf War where Abu Dhabi and Dubai came to different conclusions about the threats posed by the situation. More recently, however, foreign policy priorities and preferences have split the state to the extent that different parties have conflicting strategies that are at direct odds with each other. The Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah all hold different positions towards Iran. Nonetheless, as the capital Emirate, Abu Dhabi is responsible for directing the state's policy and strategy. Although the 2009 financial crash accelerated the UAE's transition from a federally administered state to acting in a more unified nation, differences between the UAE's two largest Emirates have continued.[4] While there are still federal positions held by non-Abu Dhabi elites, most of these are within non-structural entities e.g. while the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation is Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for International Cooperation both originate

from Dubai, and in contrast to Sheikh Abdullah, are not royal family members but derive from prominent family clans.[5] This delegation of authority supports the UAE's federal identity but clearly circumvent Abu Dhabi's clear priority over security-focused initiatives.

An understanding of how powers were historically allocated within the UAE and the way in which they have been concentrated lends support to this article's notion that the UAE operates a 'state-in-society' foreign policy model. It is further supported by an examination of the role of the UAE within MENA particularly within the domain of defence and security, sectors which have traditionally been directed from Abu Dhabi.

The UAE's Foreign Policy is, according to Hellyer, driven by a unified ideological and belief system.[6] He identifies four principal priorities within it:

(1) Security of the Arabian Gulf
(2) Close ties with the other states on the Arabian Peninsula
(3) Heightened engagement with MENA states
(4) Enhanced co-operation with the Islamic World

While this categorisation is over simplified and entirely disregards the UAE's engagement with the non-Islamic world, Hellyer does highlight the perception of how strongly the UAE prioritises its immediate regional engagement.

Since the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York, the UAE has firmly aligned itself with the West and has become a leading and active opponent of violent and non-violent extremism within MENA. Examples of the UAE's counter-terrorism and security cooperation include the establishment of the Abu Dhabi based Hedayah Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) centre[7] in line with the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, the launch of the Sawab Centre to counter Daesh propaganda and discourse,[8] and the fact that the UAE became the first MENA state formally to promote counter-terrorism cooperation with the EU's police forces.[9] There is a general belief that the UAE has prioritised the employment of hard power over soft power; one which while correct, is heavily simplified.

The UAE was not always perceived as a close security partner of the West. In particular, two of the 9/11 hijackers were of Emirati nationality, and

the second eldest son of Sheikh Zayed, Sheikh Sultan, was reprimanded for his extreme views. The UAE was also one of three states to have recognised the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan before rescinding its recognition on 22 September 2001. It even hosted Osama bin Laden for medical treatment shortly before the attacks in the US. Here, scepticism towards Abu Dhabi climaxed in 2006 when Dubai Port (DP) World purchased a port management business on mainland America. The purchase led to a great deal of concern in the US, and ultimately DP World was forced to sell its share after its management came under heavy scrutiny within the public domain. Since then, the UAE has masterfully learnt to align its political strategy with international discourse and sentiment over prevailing issues. Their sophisticated alignment of interests and action have been used to legitimise Abu Dhabi's behaviour across the MENA.

The UAE's regional security-led engagement accelerated with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. During this period, Abu Dhabi has maintained its MENA policy direction of countering terrorism and extremism by implementing numerous hard and soft power tactics in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Qatar, and Yemen. While its historical disagreements with Doha may be noted, Abu Dhabi's wider engagement across MENA is of especial interest, as the linkages exploited for political leverage are not dependent on *asabiya* (blood ties) but rather on ideological grounding and dogmatic application.

UAE post-Arab spring security engagement

At the 2017 United Nations General Assembly, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan highlighted Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia as the key areas of security engagement in which the UAE believes political and security can be more easily achieved.[10] The UAE's is proactive in all of these theatres. However, this article will examine Abu Dhabi's engagement in Libya, Somalia, and Yemen in more depth to argue that it is within these areas the UAE's engagement strategy is more pronounced. Consistent across all three environments is the UAE's pursuit of countering violent extremism and political Islam, and the fostering and development of political-military ties.

Libya

The UAE joined NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya in March 2011 and was a key regional partner in NATO's air campaign against Ghaddafi.[11] The UAE contributed air combat fighters and actively participated in the aerial blockade of Libya crucially learning how to effectively cooperate and engage in multi-national coalitions, a lesson which has enabled them to further enhance their overseas military operations.

After Ghaddafi's removal from power, the UAE's operations in Libya focused on the former Libyan military commander, General Haftar. While at first Abu Dhabi's ties to Haftar were discreet, the growing relationship between the UAE, Egypt, and Russia created an unofficial coalition which secured a conduit of financial, political and military assistance. While the post-Ghaddafi Libya was descending into chaos with a multitude of violent extremists emerging across the political spectrum, the UAE's strong relationship with a former Ghaddafi General, and one who worked closely with the US, angered many opponents and resultantly made the UAE a prominent target within Libya.

In the 2014 escalation of violence, the UAE and Saudi Arabia launched bombing sorties upon Tripoli in a series of operations which stunned the international community not only for their success – at least in their immediate execution – but also because they were willing to engage in such missions.[12] As the operations failed to stop Islamist militants from taking Tripoli, the UAE embassy (along with the Egyptian embassy) was targeted in a series of suicide bombings.[13]

Having formed a strong alliance between Abu Dhabi and Cairo, the UAE worked with France and Italy to engage in cross border attacks into Eastern Libya, where bombing sorties occurred. The increased presence of Western forces in Libya has slowly legitimised the role of Haftar in Libyan politics, and that of the UAE's foreign policy there. The fostering of informal ties went beyond Haftar with the former UN Envoy to Libya Bernardino Leon moving from his role to become dean of the Emirates Diplomatic Academy.[14] The co-option of leading political figures into the Emirati domain has provided a long term platform from which to exert influence for extended periods. This has been mirrored with other states.[15]

The combination of informal political-military ties and operational engagements within Libya has furthered the UAE's Libya foreign

policy. Working closely with Moscow and Cairo, Abu Dhabi has co-opted Haftar and an increasingly wide array of non-state actors to move Libya towards a potential political settlement and defeat the violent extremists that have exploited the post-civil war chaos, and who are now within the UN-recognised government.

General Haftar's forces were able to gain an upper hand for a short period of time before a retreat was called on the attempt to capture Tripoli. Since then, Libya has become the theatre for a proxy conflict between the UAE and Turkey, in which maximum pressure is being applied by the UAE, Russia and France in an attempt to halt Turkish expansionism in Africa. Nevertheless, the UAE has slowed its direct support for General Haftar, instead preferring to allow the conflict to continue at a lower intensity and at a lower cost. The UAE's involvement in Libya is a clear example of the implementation of its strategy, applying direct as well as indirect foreign support.

Somalia

The UAE's foreign policy towards Somalia has been packaged as a security-focused initiative. However, the implementation of multiple strategic endeavours suggests far wider aspirations. The varied channels of Emirati engagement in Somalia showcase a unique public-private political-military strategy that demonstrates the full array of tools at the UAE's disposal.

The UAE's primary motivation for engagement in Somalia was to secure international shipping routes. The threats against them emanating from this quarter were endangering one of the core pillars of the UAE's economy, maritime trade. On account of Somalia's strategic location in the Horn of Africa and at the Bab al Mandeb chokepoint, piracy within this area was causing great levels of disturbance. The spike in pirate attacks from 2006 onwards led to cost increases of between 8 and 13 per cent on all shipping, and was heavily impacting the UAE's predominant port operator, DP World.[16] While this primarily impacted the Emirate of Dubai, given the considerable value of the company to the UAE the commercial success of DP World was also of prime concern to Abu Dhabi.

As the UAE's trade and commerce hub, the Emirate of Dubai has been key in orchestrating initiatives to combat piracy. DP World has been central to this and has acted as a key public–private partner for the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to augment its implementation of

foreign policy towards Somalia. This climaxed in 2010–2014 when UAE MOFA and DP World jointly held several annual conferences to discuss and rally support for causes that were aimed at countering piracy off Somalia.[17] While these conferences only generated minimal immediate tangible results, the UAE's hosting of such events ensured it became the location for future diplomatic engagements within Somalia.

While the international community's military strategy in Somalia was predominantly sea-based, the UAE looked to combine its political engagement with a ground-based military strategy. The implementation of this strategy however was executed through private military contractors (PMCs) Sterling Corporate Services[18] and Erik Prince's Blackwater successor Academi [*sic*]. This however ended poorly after salaries were not paid and foreign trainers were killed by Somali troops.

The development of ground-based capabilities was initially fixed on the Puntland Maritime Police Force, the Mogadishu-based National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA), and more recently the Somali National Army (SNA). In the latter cases, the UAE has been battling Turkey for proxy influence in Somalia, and their foreign policy competition has accelerated Somalia's federalisation on account of the pockets of efficiency that have emerged. In this confrontation, Abu Dhabi has attempted to co-opt the US into supporting its initiative as a trusted partner that shares the same ambitions and goals.

The UAE's involvement in Yemen has recently focused Abu Dhabi's attention on Somaliland. Following immediately behind DP World's successful 30-year concession bid to develop Berbera port and operate its engagements, the UAE formally agreed a deal to construct a naval military base outside of Berbera port.[19] While this was later cancelled, the intention that it demonstrated – to build a wider presence within the Indian Ocean and Horn of Africa – would have provided an ability significantly to expand its scope of influence. DP World's slow progress at developing Puntland's Bosaso port has caused discontent within the regional administration.

While the UAE has attempted to maintain a wide level of support within Somalia, it faces strong competition from Qatar and Turkey. Ankara has a strong base of support within Mogadishu. However, Abu Dhabi has been cultivating opposition parties to undermine upcoming elections and win the state back into its sphere of heightened influence. Like Libya, the battle over Somalia is as much about re-establishing a presence for Abu

Dhabi as it is about ensuring the rejection of its ideological opponents Qatar and Turkey.

Yemen

Since the Arab Spring, the UAE's involvement within Yemen has been focused upon its role within the Saudi-led coalition. The UAE's focus has been on the capturing and securing of South Yemen from Houthi forces, and from Islamic extremists that have benefited from years of state neglect. The ground strategy however has incorporated two additional and unofficial objectives: the fostering of Southern cession for its own benefit, and conflict with Islamic extremists such as AQAP and the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, *Al-Islah*. These objectives have been in stark contrast to those of Saudi Arabia.

The UAE has a long history in South Yemen, with the Al-Nahyan ruling family claiming heritage in Wadi Nahyan.[20] Following earlier civil wars within Yemen, the UAE has integrated a sizeable South Yemeni diaspora, many of whom are now officers within the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Following the expulsion of long-time President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a process of de-Salehisation has been attempted to remove components of his authority across the Yemeni state. This has been painful especially in the security apparatus, as Saleh and his allies had long dominated this area. The UAE has however fostered alternate security organisations to those promoted by Saudi Arabia, further fracturing the war-torn state. Groups include the Security Belt forces and the National Resistance. The most prominent engagement however has been the attempted reorganisation of the Political Security Office (PSO) into UAE-supported groups, as it was the principal intelligence organisation within Yemen.

The development of Southern cession-focused security groups was cemented after the establishment of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the de-facto government in South Yemen. This evolved after years of direct relationship management by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) with Yemeni tribes and leading political figures Aidarous al-Zubaidi and Hani bin Breik. The UAE's engagement in informal relations is seen in direct contrast to Saudi Arabia's direct commitment to maintaining a working relationship at a state level with the Yemeni President Abdrubbah Hadi. This juncture was however exactly where the Emirati-Saudi partnership in Yemen disintegrated.

The UAE's focus on delivering security and stability within the South saw it confront *Al-Islah,* AQAP, and IS. This was legitimised by Abu Dhabi's strong relationship with the US in confronting terror on the Arabian Peninsula. Through this dynamic, the UAE was able to bring Sudan back into the GCC fold and deploy a contingent of Sudanese Janjaweed soldiers to South Yemen to support the UAE's objectives, thus circumventing Abu Dhabi's vulnerability over its slight manpower.

This, however, became a major point of disagreement between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh as the UAE interprets *Al-Islah* in the same vein as AQAP and the IS. *Al-Islah* are however a strong socio-political network within Yemen, with President Hadi and his cabinet closely aligned with the group. This strategic split contributed to a deterioration of stability within the South and triggered what has become a further front within Yemen's civil war.

The UAE has since taken a step back, having formally announced its military withdrawal in February 2020; however, they continue to take part in military engagements in support of the STC. The initial tension between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi has abated, thanks to the relative stability delivered by the STC and the lack of options for Riyadh. It is however largely through the UAE's relationship with the STC that the Saudi-led coalition has been able to achieve a preliminary strategic gain. Abu Dhabi's strong relationship with the political-military leadership within parts of South Yemen provides a long-term foundation from which it can continue to generate sympathy and deliver future political gains.

Conclusions

The Arab Spring illustrated the significant threat posed by domestic forces in all GCC states. While the collective response initially focused on the appeasement of these threats, many have looked to counter the regional wave of political developments to suit their own political outlooks. Where the states of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar have a not placed so much importance in developing their coercive apparatus to deploy such assets internationally, the UAE's appreciation for military engagement has seen it participate in multiple theatres.

The interpretation and application of strategic choice within the GCC's international relations have evidenced an evolution of foreign relations

whereby, as a result of differing foreign policies among the GCC states, external actors and states are gradually contributing to the re-interpretation of the region's external relations. The cohesive network between Abu Dhabi-Riyadh-Cairo has successfully played Washington, Moscow, and Paris for greater regional influence and has as a result been able to successfully work towards a re-imagined post-Arab Spring vision. This has developed from a pragmatic approach to one that is about denying an outpost for its adversaries.

The critical deficiency in Emirati manpower has encouraged greater diplomatic engagement in the Post-Arab Spring era. Combined commercial and security ties have succeeded in developed countries, however, the war-torn theatres of Libya, Somalia, and Yemen have required the implementation of a multi-faceted strategic approach. Abu Dhabi's fostering of inter-personnel ties supports its political-military strategy and forms the basis for its security-led development across MENA. The intimate knowledge and handling of portfolios by senior Emirati figures and their patrons indicates a long-term strategy that will continue through either their current form or another body.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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